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To show and to designate: attitudes towards representing craftsmanship and material culture in Middle Kingdom elite tombs

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Abstract:

Middle Kingdom elite tombs are known to feature a substantial number of scenes showing the activities of craftsmen and their products. While these scenes have been collected and occasionally commented upon in the past, they have hardly ever been studied making full use of the available spectrum of information, *i.e.*, taking into account the pictorial as well as the textual levels of representation.

In order to remedy this dissatisfying situation a specific part of the research project *From Object to Icon* – funded by the Austrian Science Fund and hosted by the Institute for Egyptology at the University of Vienna – is devoted to investigating the complex relationship between image and text in these scenes. Building upon the results and the infrastructure established by the forerunner project *Meketre*, a special database has been set up in order to collect, classify and analyse all designations of craftsmen, craft activities, tools and products contained in the tomb decoration.

The present paper is meant to highlight the problems and potential gains of such an approach by presenting a case study of the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan. The questions raised comprise: Are there any discernible rules governing the application of labels/captions in burial assemblages in general, and in figurative wall decoration in particular? How does the information provided by the captions relate to the pictorial content? What is the relation of these scenes and their captions to other categories of contemporaneous funerary equipment (*e.g.*, coffins with their *frises d'objets*, funerary models, deposited implements, *etc.*) and to the social structure of Middle Bronze Age Egypt at large?

Keywords: Egyptology, Middle Kingdom, tomb decoration, decorum, labelling, relation between text and image, representation of society

Introduction

It seems almost ironic that what we have come to associate with ancient Egyptian elite culture is to a large degree the product of people who were never part of this culture and who can usually not be traced in the archaeological record as individuals commanding a voice of their own. Much of our basic knowledge of Middle Kingdom (c. 2040–1750 BC) Egypt stems from rock-cut tombs of the highest echelons of society, but we have no remnants of those who were actually responsible for hewing out the subterranean chambers and shafts; we may describe and analyse hundreds of square meters of painted tomb decoration but fail to identify the specialists involved in its creation; we can study thousands of wooden funerary models deposited primarily during the earlier parts of the Middle Kingdom in the burial chambers of office holders, some of those models even representing meticulously detailed workshop

scenes of woodworking (cf. Winlock 1955, pls. 28-29), but the carvers themselves remain in the shadow of abstract concepts describing merely levels of technical agency.

While the overall problem of defective, inadequate, and biased sources is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, the study of material culture and craftsmanship in Middle Bronze Age Egypt may benefit from a complementary view which focusses not so much on the objects and their creators themselves but rather on the very modes and strategies adopted to represent both within the iconography of the elite tombs. By re-framing the topic and looking through the lens of funerary iconography, the pertinent questions relate not only to positivist ‘facts’ of what is represented in which contexts (see, *e.g.*, Klebs 1922; Vandier 1964; 1969; 1978; Kanawati and Woods 2010), but also to omissions and general attitudes towards choosing, arranging and elaborating information on the tomb walls and burial equipment. Such an approach inevitably calls for a thorough integration of the analysis of textual and pictorial representations that are far too often considered separately and in isolation from each other.

The following paragraphs are not meant to present the results of a completed study, but rather aim at staking out the potential of further in-depth research.

The project and basic research questions

When the project *Meketre* (Middle Kingdom Tomb Relief Evolution) was started at the University of Vienna Institute for Egyptology in 2009, it helped to spark renewed interest in the long neglected field of Middle Kingdom non-royal tomb iconography. One of the major outcomes of the project was the creation of a publicly accessible online database of categorised and annotated iconographic themes, scenes and motifs from Middle Kingdom tombs, the MEKETREpository (<http://meketre.org>). In the follow-up project *From Object to Icon*, which was equally funded by the Austrian Sciences Fund FWF and run from 2013 till 2017, the major line of investigation concentrated on the relation between the material world (the ‘objects’) and its representation in two-dimensional art (the ‘icons’). Within this framework, research also extended to the designation of the objects/icons as evidenced by labels/captions on the tomb walls and in other textual sources of the period. However, it soon became clear that any meaningful study devoted to this topic could not solely investigate how objects represented through icons were designated on reliefs and wall paintings, but had equally to address the question in which instances products and producers received designations at all. Once this perspective has been adopted one is inevitably led to the wider issue of identifying any potential rules or guidelines organising the use of labels/captions on tomb walls and funerary equipment in general. In an ideal world with optimal sources and presupposing completely rationalizable human action one might dream of reconstructing a set of rules/guidelines tied back to decorum¹ which would constitute a sort of ‘*grammaire de la tombe*’² and account for the overall layout of any given tomb as well as the large number of distinct choices made at the subordinated levels of its decoration. It goes without saying that such a scenario is neither realistic nor is it compatible with the great variety of tomb decoration attested during the given period and the multitude of observable parameters (ranging from choices of ground plan and the thematic repertoire to stylistic details and the application of specific colours). Yet, this rather pessimistic appraisal of the available evidence should not curb curiosity and remove questions of ‘why’ and ‘by agency of whom/what’ from the scholarly agenda. Meaningful research in this direction should perhaps start with

¹ For a pertinent example of the use of the concept ‘decorum’ within the study of Egyptian funerary iconography see Riggs 2013.

² The term is here coined in analogy to the ‘*grammaire du temple*’ which refers to the system of deliberate principles guiding the design and decoration of Egyptian temples during the Graeco-Roman Period. See, *e.g.*, Derchain 1962, 37-38; Winter 1968, 14-15; Cauville 1983.

identifying potentially significant patterns/distributions of individual features or feature complexes, irrespective of their presumptive position within the decision-making processes constitutive of the appearance of a tomb as a whole. In the following, I will try to highlight a few observations relating to the application of captions and their potential significance for understanding ancient Egyptian conceptions of social hierarchy.

Using texts in tombs: autonomous texts, labels and ‘zeros’

It may appear as a truism that the Egyptians living during the Middle Bronze Age made extensive use of the hieroglyphic script when it came to furnishing the funerary abode of the members of the elite. However, when looking more closely at the different categories of funerary equipment, it becomes clear that the extent and repertoire of such uses were rather restricted and that the motivation behind the inclusion of texts is not always transparent to us. Arguably the most conspicuous category of text carrying objects found in Middle Kingdom tombs constitute the decorated rectangular wooden coffins whose interiors are in a large number of cases covered with a selection of spells from a corpus commonly referred to in Egyptology as the Coffin Texts (Buck 1935–1961; Faulkner 1973–1978; Willems 1996a). These often very long texts of an unequivocally religious nature are not normally accompanied by pictorial elements directly illustrating their contents.³ However, there exists a specific group of images inside the coffins which is often placed immediately above or adjacent to the Coffin Texts, namely the so-called *frises d’objets* or *object friezes*. As their name suggests, these bands of images depict a row of religiously charged objects, substances and symbols that possessed significance for the resurrection of the dead buried inside the coffin. In many cases these *frises d’objets* seem to function as a kind of vignette to the adjacent Coffin Texts, depicting objects used in rituals which are mentioned or alluded to in the respective texts (Willems 1996b, 58). Although a comprehensive contextualising study of the friezes making full use of their potential as sources for ancient Egyptian culture still remains a desideratum (see, for now, Jéquier 1921; Willems 1988, 48-49, 175-228; 1996b, 56-79), it is evident that one of their most distinctive features (even if not present in all friezes) are accompanying labels providing designations of the respective objects depicted (**Fig. 1**). The relation between labelling text and labelled icon can be quite complex at times. In certain instances, for example, a number of iconographically distinct, though related, objects may receive a common label (*e.g.*, *jkm*, ‘shield’, used for a variety of different types of shields: Jéquier 1921: 229-231), while in other instances objects represented through similar icons are carefully differentiated by their respective designations (*e.g.*, different types of sceptres: Jéquier 1921: 181-185). In a number of Middle Kingdom burials some of the objects depicted in the *frises d’objets* were actually included in the burial equipment as three-dimensional ‘realia’ or full-scale ‘models’⁴, usually placed on top of the mummy itself or near the coffin (*cf.*, *e.g.*, Quibell 1908, pl. XXVIII; Fischer 1978, 25-26; Willems 1988, 200-206; Podvin 1997, 74-174). Interestingly, these objects do not normally feature any labelling or indication of ownership. In stark contrast to their two-dimensional counterparts on the coffin walls it was apparently not deemed necessary or desirable to explicate their designation and use. A similar observation can be made in relation to the wooden models depicting boats with

³ The so-called ‘Book of the Two Ways’, a specific group of Coffin Texts spells from the necropolis of Deir el-Bersha in Middle Egypt, constitutes an exception in that a graphic rendering of parts of the netherworld is one of its constitutive elements. *Cf.* Lesko 1972; Hermesen 1991; Backes 2005.

⁴ It has to be stressed that many of the (usually wooden) sceptres, batons, sandals, elements of regalia, *etc.*, found in non-royal burials of the Middle Kingdom do not seem to have been ‘functional’ in the narrow sense of the term and should probably be taken as three-dimensional equivalents of the flat images in the *frises d’objets* rather than the actual objects themselves. Of course, matters are much more complex than a simplifying dichotomous distinction between ‘the actual objects’ and ‘models/images of those objects’ can convey.

their passengers and crews, offering bearers, servants or whole dioramas of ‘daily life’ (*i.e.*, agricultural activities, animal husbandry, craftsmen/-women at work, occasions of exerting administrative control, *etc.*) which resemble the two-dimensional renderings painted on the walls of elite tombs in many respects (cf. Reisner 1913; Winlock 1955; Tooley 1995; Arnold 2005). While the painted scenes normally feature some sort of labelling or scene captions (see below) and regularly state at least the name of the tomb owner wherever he/she is depicted, the models are usually devoid of any inscriptions even if the tomb owner is meant to be represented within a scene (as, *e.g.*, with the ‘inspection of cattle’ model from the Theban tomb of the chancellor Meketre: Winlock 1955, 19-22, pls. 13-15). Exceptions do occur, but they are normally restricted to jottings not directly related to, or identifying, any of the figures forming part of the model ensembles. For example, a number of figures of scribes or priests from models of granaries or funerary barges are shown with inscribed papyrus documents (likewise made of wood) on their knees or in their hands (*e.g.*, Parkinson and Quirke 1995, 37, fig. 23 [= BM EA 41573]; British Museum Online Collection, BM EA 9525; Kamal 1911, 23, no. 3 [= Cairo JE 42857]). The walls of the granary models may also contain hieratic dockets referring to the types of grain stored or some similar information (Budge 1925, pl. VI, below; British Museum Online Collection, BM EA 28104; Parkinson 1999, 128, cat. 42 [= BM EA 41573]). These examples may be conceptualised as auto-referential uses of writing and not as labels in the normal sense, since their *raison d’être* is intrinsically linked to the topic of the scene, thereby adding to the (felt) realism of the respective model. In cases where the model of a funerary barge comprises a representation of the coffin of the deceased, the coffin may be inscribed with (shortened) versions of texts typically found on the exterior sides of real coffins and identify the owner of the model while remaining within the sphere of auto-referential emulation of reality (*e.g.*, Reisner 1913, 35-36, CG 4847, pl. IX). On the other hand, we know of certain Middle Kingdom boat models whose figures – depicting priests, and ritualists in the guise of deities – bear hieratic labels stating the names of distinct individuals (cf. the case of the boat model of Ukhhotep in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 12.183.3: Strouse 2000, 48, fig. 56; Allen 2016). These texts may be called referential in that they identify (‘label’) the respective figures with specific human beings but transcend the realism of the auto-referential texts. A small number of wooden statuettes depicting offering bearers are also identified by names and titles written on their bases, but this practice remains exceptional (cf. Tooley 1995, 21, fig. 11; David 2007, 55, fig. 36; 57). Another meta-level of the use of writing is represented by some house models of varying types that, on one of their exterior walls, bear offering formulae or comparable religious texts in cursive hieroglyphs which do not seem to be directly related to the daily life activities represented by the models themselves (*e.g.*, Cairo JE 28818 [model from Akhmim]; cf. Tooley 1995, 22) and can be tentatively characterised as extra-referential.⁵ Since most of the known models from the period are left completely uninscribed it is difficult to ascertain the motivation behind occasional cases of inclusion of texts. Apparently, the usual *chaîne opératoire* for the models did not involve employing scribes, whose expertise might have been deemed more usefully employed in other contexts. One has also to consider the possibility that many of the grave goods associated with a typical Middle Kingdom elite burial were pre-produced at provincial workshops without a specific person in mind (irrespective of the fact that these workshops might have been part of or associated with the household/domain of a leading provincial family).⁶ Taken all in all, the majority of grave goods associated with elite burials of the

⁵ For narratological concepts applied to the study of inscriptions on ancient Greek pottery see Müller 2016, 113–123.

⁶ Winlock (1955, 77) remarks that Meketre seems to have ‘*procure[d] his models from several sources and perhaps at different times*’.

Middle Kingdom⁷ bear neither formulae nor labels and were not explicitly personalised beyond being deposited together with other items forming the burial equipment of a specific individual.

<<fig 1::Jurman-fig-01>>

[Figure 1. Object frieze on outer coffin of Hapiankhtify from Meir, 12th Dynasty, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1912, acc.-no. 12.183.11a (photo of the author)]

Texts on tomb walls: biographies, offering lists, captions

Besides coffins, the wall paintings of the tombs from the highest echelons of Egyptian society constitute the main source for texts coming from non-royal funerary contexts.⁸ Different from the categories described above, however, these inscriptions are usually found in the upper parts of the tomb structure, the (publicly) accessible tomb chapels that continued to be used for the funerary cult of the tomb owner and his/her family after the burial. Accordingly, aspects of display and (self-)representation play a much more important role in these texts than in those found inside the burial chamber. It is here that we find lengthy biographical texts (rare as they may be in Middle Kingdom tomb contexts) and large-scale ‘ornamental’ texts which display the tomb owner’s name and strings of his most important titles in prominent positions. Other types of inscriptions inside the tomb chapels include more or less elaborate offering lists and religious formulae connected with funerary rituals. While all these categories function more or less autonomously and do not necessarily depend on interaction with pictorial elements, the texts which shall be the focus of the next paragraphs are by their very nature associated with specific scenes or icons and can be termed ‘labels’/‘captions’.

Labels and captions relating to scenes of ‘daily life’

The majority of Middle Kingdom tombs with preserved decoration feature a selection of scenes devoted to aspects of ‘daily life’ (for an overview cf. Klebs 1922; Vandier 1964; 1969; 1978; Scheel 1986; Kanawati and Woods 2010; MEKETREpository). Yet, owing to changes in the significance of certain thematic repertoires and unfavourable conditions of preservation at many sites in northern Upper Egypt they are not as plentiful as in the mastaba tombs of the Old Kingdom residence. The typical amount and variety of texts accompanying these images is also rather small when compared with the Old Kingdom.

While all texts of this category may be viewed as non-narrative referential ‘labels’ (or ‘Vermerke’, see Jansen-Winkel 1990), it seems worthwhile to make a further distinction between ‘labels’ in the narrower sense, which simply identify figures, objects and actions, and ‘captions’, which provide some sort of context for a scene or group of scenes such as a title or expressions of direct speech attributed to certain protagonists (usually referred to in German Egyptology as ‘*Reden und Rufe*’), thus creating a kind of virtual soundscape (cf. also Quirke 2016, 428-430). Auto-referential texts (see above) such as, *e.g.*, the content of a written papyrus document depicted in the hand of an official reporting to Khnumhotep II in a scene of

⁷ ‘Elite’ is here understood as encompassing the first three levels of the basic model of Middle Kingdom Egyptian (rural) society proposed by Seidlmayer (2009, 365, tab. 11). In burials of lower strata of society, the use of writing is almost non-existent.

⁸ Unfortunately, the burial chambers of those tombs which feature richly decorated wall decoration have been almost completely plundered during the last millennia. Comparisons between uses of texts on tomb walls and on grave goods have therefore to revert to two, socially distinct, categories of burials.

the latter's tomb at Beni Hassan (cf. Newberry 1893, pls. XXX, XXXVIII, 1-2; Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 130b-d) are also best regarded as a specific sub-group of 'captions'.⁹ In combination with the accompanying images, the labels and captions are a mode of representing contemporaneous physical and social reality while at the same time shaping and transforming it according to criteria rooted in the inter-subjective decorum as well as in more specific and personal concerns of the tomb owner and/or his subordinates. Although many of the topics depicted in the tomb chapels of the period may pertain to funerary rites or be imbued with strong religious symbolism, they nevertheless contain valuable information that can be analysed in terms of how social reality was construed and presented. This is of special relevance to the representation of people who were not part of the tomb owner's family or members of the national/regional elite such as craftsmen, workers and their foremen, peasants, fishermen, accountant scribes, *etc.* Since the degree of individualisation of these people through distinct units of textual information differs significantly from group to group, from figure to figure and from tomb to tomb, the question arises which kind of decision making processes and criteria were responsible for the respective results. One may even ask whether the agency of the individuals actually carrying out the decoration of the tomb chapel had any part in arriving at these choices. Is it possible, after all, to gain access to input/intentions of non-elite members of Egyptian society through the analysis of funerary monuments of the elite?

A case study: the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan (BH 3)

It is perhaps best to approach this and similar questions by concentrating on a narrowly defined case study which, in our case, shall be the scenes of 'daily life' in the tomb chapel of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan (BH 3). It is no coincidence that this very tomb has been chosen as the topic of many exemplary studies on Middle Kingdom culture and society (Lloyd 1992; Kamrin 1999; Seidlmayer 2007; Nelson-Hurst 2015). Together with the neighbouring tomb of Khnumhotep II's predecessor Amenemhat/Imeny (BH 2) it is not only the largest rock-cut tomb in the necropolis but features also one of the best-preserved and richest non-royal decoration programmes of the entire Middle Kingdom. It is also quite well documented, although even the most recent publication (Kanawati and Evans 2014) contains errors in the scene drawings that have a potential bearing on the study of labels and captions.¹⁰

In order to better gauge the significance of the individual attestations of labelling I will provide a short overview of the tomb chapel's pictorial programme and its quantitative aspects.

The decorated part of the chapel is divided into two parts, the large main hall of almost square ground plan, and a small adjacent room (the 'shrine') in the axis of the tomb, originally housing Khnumhotep's cult statue. For the purpose of this paper I will adopt a very simplified model of the thematic categories present in the decoration and divide the content of the scenes into three broadly defined categories (for a much more complex and nuanced approach see Kamrin 1999, 46-168). The first group is formed by scenes of 'daily life' which show the tomb owner and/or some of his subordinates while overseeing/interacting with people of lower status such as craftsmen, farmers, fishermen, foreigners, *etc.* The focus seems to lie not

⁹ The use of cursive hieroglyphs instead of hieratic clearly shows that coherence in the modes of display was more important to the designers of Khnumhotep's tomb than the realistic rendering of an actual document layout. On the contrary, in the neighbouring, slightly earlier, tomb of Imeny (BH 2) the texts of the depicted documents and the captions of direct speech are rendered almost exclusively in hieratic script. Cf. Newberry 1893, pl. XXI; Rabehl 2006, 350.

¹⁰ Cf., e.g., the rendering of the word *an.t* with missing < t > in the third column from the right in Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 137 with pl. 76a and Newberry 1893, pl. XXXIV.

on the interaction as such, but on the exertion of control and the successful fulfilment of the tasks assigned to the people depicted. While some themes such as the harvesting of flax or the building of ships can (but need not) be interpreted in an exclusively secular context and may represent typical, recurring events, others such as the production of wooden shrines and statues of the tomb owner bear unmistakably funerary connotations and relate to specific occasions.¹¹ The second group comprises scenes of explicitly religious significance which are mostly tied to the funerary rituals. To this group belong the images of the journey to and from the sacred site of Abydos, the entire southern wall showing the deceased sitting in front of an offering table and receiving défilés of offering bearers, the transportation of Khnumhotep II's statue, depicted above the entrance to the main hall, as well as all the ritual scenes in the small statue shrine. The third group of scenes present Khnumhotep II as the main acting protagonist of a large tableau and exhibit strong symbolic overtones while at the same time remaining within the sphere of earthly experience. They show Khnumhotep II fishing and fowling in the marshes (eastern wall), and hunting desert animals (upper registers of the northern wall). Even if these three basic thematic categories seem at first quite distinct from each other, they do by no means represent isolated social spheres. Members of Khnumhotep's family and his retainers can be found within nearly every register of the main hall, and some subordinates depicted in the 'scenes of daily life' reappear as offering bearers or among the défilés in the large tableau of the southern wall (e.g., the gardener Netjery-nakht, the like-named scribe Netjery-nakht or the steward of the funerary foundation Netjeru-hotep). As has already been pointed out by Seidlmayer (2007, 355-365) and Nelson-Hurst (2015, 261), the people depicted in Khnumhotep's vicinity are presented as part of his immediate social environment, and their relative closeness to him may be seen as an indicator of status within the community of the Oryx Nome, the Upper Egyptian province headed by Khnumhotep II. The significance of this 'social fabric' is also reflected in a passage of Khnumhotep's biographical text, which occupies the main hall's bottom registers:

*'he consolidated the name (i.e. memory) of his advisory council (q nb .t=f) as distinguished according to their offices, the excellent ones among his house(hold) (p rw=f), whom he singled out from his estate personnel (mrw.t), (namely) every office which he controlled and every team of craftsmen (Hmw.t, or: every craft?) as they exist.'*¹²

Taken literally, the statement could be seen as a cue or motto governing the selection of people being included in the decoration of the tomb chapel. According to Nelson-Hurst (2015, 261-262) all those alluded to in the passage and represented within the painted scenes were part of or closely connected with Khnumhotep II's 'Social House', i.e., belonged to the family or served the governor's estate in some way or another. However, the motivation to commemorate these individuals within the tomb and thereby demonstrate the tomb owner's status as well as strengthen intra-group identity and social coherence was apparently not strong enough to provide every minor figure with a 'hieroglyphic identity' of its own. Even the figures with a label stating name and/or title may sometimes represent 'stand-ins' of specific social groups or specialists (in certain cases a hieroglyphic title refers to a group of figures) rather than actual, living individuals. I will come back to this point below.

Some statistics

¹¹ Quite interestingly, 'secular' large-scale assignments such as the construction of buildings or works carried out at dykes or canals are never depicted in Middle Kingdom tombs, although such scenes would have been ideally suited to highlight both status and managing competence of the official in charge.

¹² Translation of present author. For the hieroglyphic text see Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 108, col. 7-13. For slightly diverging translations of this passage see Seidlmayer 2007, 356-357 and Nelson-Hurst 2015, 262.

The representation of Khnumhotep's social environment inside his tomb has already been subjected to prosopographic/quantitative analyses by Seidlmayer (2007, 355-365, tabs. 7-10) and Kanawati and Evans (2014, 15-24). The following table is therefore meant to complement their results by drawing attention to some peculiarities of the distribution of textual identity markers. The limited space makes a comprehensive commentary on the chosen categorisations and their inherent problems unfeasible, but readers should be reminded that the figures given merely highlight tendencies and do not represent incontestable realities. All in all, the tomb chapel of Khnumhotep II features 455 human figures. Excluding the tomb owner and his core family of two wives, six sons, and four daughters, about 99 individuals are identified by name (cf. Kanawati and Evans 2014, 19-24). However, arriving at a precise number is not without its problems since certain like-named figures depicted in different registers may actually represent one and the same individual. In addition, certain labels have been lost or are too poorly preserved as to ascribe them to a specific category.

Scene category	Total of people represented	Number of people identified through name	Number of people identified through title	Number of people identified through name and title	Percentage of people identified through label	Subgroup: number of supervisors (identified through name/title)	Number of other labels/ captions (speech, action, designation of objects)
craftsmanship and household activities	50	5 (?)	14	13	64 %	10 (5)	9–10
agriculture	32	0	0	4	12.5 %	3 (2)	14
animal husbandry	28	1	7	8	57.1 %	5 (4)	12
fishing	30	0	0	1	3.3 %	1 (1)	3
administration	20	0	1	11	60 %	6 (4–5)	2

Table. Textual identification of figures within selected scenes from the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan (BH 3)

Some comments on the table

When comparing the values for the different categories, the high percentage of figures identified through name, title or both within the scenes depicting craftsmanship and household activities (occupying only 6.7 % of the decorated wall space) immediately strikes the eye. Looking solely at the activities relating to woodworking and the production of funerary equipment or implements makes the contrast to the scenes featuring agriculture or fishing appear even more striking. For example, the lower-most register of the southern part of the main hall's western wall depicts 13 individuals involved in the production of cultic/funerary goods, tools and objects of the minor arts (**Fig. 2**, lower register). Of these, at least 7 to 8 (uncertainties are due to some half-destroyed hieroglyphic labels) are identified by name alone or by name and title and are thus fully individualised. One may ponder whether this indicates that the draughtsmen/artisans responsible for designing and decorating this part of the tomb had a say in the concrete choices of labelling. If there was indeed the intention to commemorate a number of their colleagues in a way transcending the specifications defined by the tomb owner and his representatives, it remained clearly within the confines of common

conventions, however. Completely different in the amount and quality of labelling are the scenes devoted to agriculture and fishing. There, the few figures with identifying labels represent largely supervisors which do not carry out physical labour, and much space above the figures is taken up by labels/captions describing activities or citing instances of direct speech. The low degree of individualisation within these scenes seems congruent with the low social status attributed to the respective trades in Egyptian textual sources (cf. Caminos 1990; Jäger 2004, 181). In contrast, the protagonists of the scenes depicting administrative activities such as registering grain or cattle are predominantly identified through names and titles. This does not come as a surprise since they represent the social group of literate specialists singled out in Khnumhotep's biographical inscription as the backbone of his 'Social House'. But how then to account for the high percentage of named individuals in the scenes relating to herding and animal husbandry? Part of the explanation is perhaps to be sought in the fact that nearly all labelled figures of this category belong to the rows of cattle and other domestic animals being presented to Khnumhotep's magistrates in order to be counted and registered (lower registers of the northern wall). This scene runs parallel to the rows of sacrificial animals depicted at the opposite southern wall and, from a certain perspective, figures as their precondition. The high degree of labelling on these two opposing walls is perhaps related to the wish to record the resources which Khnumhotep II could draw on for his afterlife and funerary cult also on a textual level, thus providing a complement to and expansion of the actual offering lists.

<<fig 2::Jurman-fig-02>>

[Figure 2. Tomb of Khnumhotep II, Beni Hassan (BH 3): Scenes depicting domestic activities and craftsmanship in the two lower-most registers on the southern part of the main hall's western wall. Light grey rectangles indicate 'titles', dark grey rectangles indicate 'personal names', grey rectangles with rounded edges indicate 'labels of action'. Adapted from Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 121, bottom.]

Some guiding principles of labelling

As evidenced by Khnumhotep II's tomb, the tendency towards providing elaborate captions and labels for scenes is far more pronounced if the scenes are explicitly religious in nature and/or if the tomb owner is present. The return from Abydos (Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 121, register 3), depicted on the southern part of the western wall, combines both factors, although the representation of Khnumhotep II himself is not specifically labelled apart from his mention within the lengthy infinitival scene title. The scene also features labels for eight individuals, stating their names and titles (mostly members of Khnumhotep's family and/or officials belonging to his personal staff), and designating two groups of Khnumhotep's offspring. In addition, the register records three instances of direct speech attributed to anonymous sailors depicted as standing on the bows and sterns of the two boats. Another sailor called Seankh-Khnum is twice identified through name and title (or, rather, his occupation 'sailor') and perhaps associated with one of the captions of speech. Notwithstanding the limited space available for hieroglyphic labels, which precluded the identification of every figure, it is hardly a coincidence that with the exception of Seankh-Khnum all the people identified by name and title belong to the ships' passengers rather than to their crews.

In scenes focussing on craftsmanship or physical labour labels are more restricted and the principles guiding their application do not always suggest themselves. As a general rule of thumb, titles seem to bear more importance than names or the identification of activities, which is usually accomplished by using an infinitival verb form with or without a limited

number of nominal complements. Quite interestingly, compared to the tombs of the Old Kingdom, descriptions of activities occur rather rarely in tombs of the Middle Kingdom, and the general degree of labelling varies considerably even within one and the same necropolis and a limited time span. For example, the aforementioned tomb BH 2 of one of Khnumhotep II's predecessors shares a common repertoire of scenes of 'daily life' with BH 3 (Newberry 1893, 9-38, pls. XI-XX; Rabehl 2006, 339-340, 371-372), but the quantity of captions and labels is significantly lower (cf., *e.g.*, the production of flint knives, which is represented in both tombs in a similar fashion: Newberry 1893, pl. XI, top register [BH 2]; Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 121, register 5, right [BH 3]).

This and other discrepancies on the level of labelling beg the question whether iconography and accompanying texts were always transmitted and adapted in similar ways. While it is evident that the figures representing members of Khnumhotep II's family and entourage received specifically designed or 'updated' name labels referring to real individuals, this need not be the case for every labelled depiction of a subordinate. It is at least suspicious that the common name 'Nakht(y)' occurs about 15 times among the subsidiary personnel (irrespective of potentially unrecognised double counts, cf. Kanawati and Evans 2014, 21), and one may doubt whether this genuinely reflects the onomastic distribution among Khnumhotep's workforce. If not, the name could have represented to the Egyptians of the 12th Dynasty a generic marker of interchangeable identity, thereby equalling modern-day English usages of 'Johnny Everyman', which acts as a variable to be replaced with any concrete name at will.¹³

Some final remarks

Given the fact that textual scene information relating to activities and protagonists beyond the tomb owner and his inner circle was clearly non-obligatory, the conceptualisation and selection of labels could at least in part have taken place after the pictorial elements of the scenes had already been sketched or painted. Whether the draughtsmen/artisans responsible for putting the hieroglyphs on the walls had any influence on the system of labelling and could exert agency transcending merely technical execution is difficult to judge based on the existing sources. What is also difficult to assess is the precise function of labels designating an action which seems, at least to us, rather obvious based on its pictorial representation. Apparently, the ancient Egyptians felt a benefit from applying the label *wtꜥ* 'sawing', to the image of a man shown sawing through a piece of timber that has been bound on a pole lowered into the ground (see Kanawati and Evans 2014, pl. 120, first register, right). While one might argue that the inclusion of such hieroglyphic labels added to the general efficacy of the tomb decoration on a religious/magical level, the many tomb models depicting similar scenes (cf. Winlock 1955, pls. 28-29 for the model of a carpenter's shop from the tomb of Meketre) apparently did not require analogous textual commentary. Admittedly, no models from the burial of Khnumhotep II have been preserved, but I would suspect that any such models/dioramas originally associated with it were comparable to those on record in terms of their inclusion of texts. As has already been alluded to above, this discrepancy may derive at least partially from the different production procedures and environments characteristic for both groups of sources. Whereas the decoration of rock-cut tombs required a substantial number of highly trained specialists some of whom possessed advanced skills in reading and writing, the fabrication of wooden models was a task that could, in theory, be carried out at any household or institution that was subjected to Khnumhotep II's domain or held relations with it. The need for a scribe did probably not arise in such working environments, and a subsequent application of hieroglyphic or hieratic labels was perhaps considered unnecessary.

¹³ One has to admit, however, that 'Netjery-nakht' is almost as frequently represented among the labels as 'Nakht(y)'. The latter name can also function as an abbreviation of the former, making things even more complicated.

Be this as it may, the use of labels/captions within tomb chapels and the pictorial/textual representation of the tomb owner's subordinates are very complex issues that need to be carefully studied for each necropolis and for each tomb separately before one may dare to arrive at generalising conclusions. The present contribution is merely an attempt to re-frame certain questions related to the social aspects of tomb decoration, and hopefully encourages future research in this direction.

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